

The Fine Granules of History's Sediment

A review of Gary Fine's *Tiny Publics*.

Introduction

This book, *Tiny Publics*, sums up Gary Fine's sociological study of small groups over a period of 40 years. This, his life work, represents an important contribution to our understanding of social cohesion.

Fine reports the results of a series of research projects: (1) the Little League Baseball teams which made his name in 1979, (2) Dungeons and Dragon gamer clubs, (3) a culinary training class and (4) restaurant kitchens, (5) mushroom collectors clubs, (6) high school debating clubs, (7) the self-taught art market, (8) weather forecasting offices, (9) chess clubs, (10) a group of election volunteers and (11) a self-help / advocacy group (Victims of Child Abuse Laws). The general theory of small groups suggested by the vignettes he abstracts from observations of the activity of these groups is intended to complement some structural theory of large social formations to make a complete social theory.

The claim that small groups constitute the microfoundation of social structure directs attention to how groups stand between individuals and society [while] microsociology equally requires a set of macrofoundations. (2012: 16 & 33)

So Fine accepts structuralism of some kind as a general theory of society 'at large', but places the activity of small groups at the nodes of societal structure rather than individuals or abstractions.

It is the great merit of Fine's work is that he conceives the 'small group' not as a collection of individuals united by affiliation or common interest or situation, but rather as a form of activity, as a *unit* of activity in fact, which is constituted and continuously reconstituted by the actions of its participants. This means that the small group is not to be characterised as observing norms existing externally to the activity of the group, but on the contrary, he shows concretely, with his vignettes, how the unique culture of a small group is modified with a kind of bricolage created, accumulated and maintained by the actors themselves. This is a first rate foundation for social theory. But is the incremental modification of group norms he observes really how social change takes place?

This review functions as a vehicle to suggest a foundation for a critical social theory which retains the merit of empirical concreteness which is the great merit of Fine's work but allows the detailed observations of the sociologist to inform a general social theory without recourse to metaphor and other unwarranted extrapolations from

empirical content. If an approach to social theory writ large is to be developed from Fine's work, we must begin by questioning Fine's claim to having developed a theory of social change.

Social Change

According to Fine, social change *originates* from small groups, mediated by *subcultures* which stand between small group and social structures:

subcultural traditions derive from the diffusion of group cultures ... Subculture is a gloss for knowledge and behaviours that spread within interlocking groups, ... This occurs through multiple group memberships, weak ties, structural roles, and media diffusion. (2012: 147)

But the trivial production of culture in small groups which fill the pages of Fine's reports does not tell us how the group came to exist in the first place. Fine makes the self-evident claim that 'cliques, clubs, congregations, and teams are not spontaneously generated but born of other groups' (2012: 139). But the process of launching a qualitatively new form of practice is not something he is ever lucky enough to observe: all he sees is the on-going form of practice once it has become institutionalised. Being a dedicated sociological observer, who relies on personal experience for his material, he does not investigate the origin of the material which forms the content of his theory but dismisses it with a gesture.

In fact, the historical record shows that Little League Baseball is a non-profit corporation founded in 1939 by a young office worker, Carl Stotz, who had a bright idea while playing with his own children. With the declared aim of teaching fair play and teamwork to boys and girls, he mobilised two friends, and their wives and then roped in three local businesses as sponsors to launch the Little League, and eventually Little League Baseball was given a charter by the US government and thoroughly institutionalised. So it was only trivially true that LLB was born of a group, but what were the conditions that meant that LLB would become an American institution? Nothing in Fine's observations of LLB teams sheds any light on this surely important question.

Fine's idea is that he has observed the evolution of culture within the established idioculture of small groups. By 'idioculture' he means a unit of culture, defined as:

a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and that serve as the basis of further interaction. (Fine 1979)

He recognises that what he observes is a system of beliefs and practices which, despite being subject to ongoing revision, have already been institutionalised:

Once cultures are institutionalised, they retain their shape unless subject to new circumstances, internal reassessments, or external shocks. The desire for stability in cultural life mirrors the desire for stability in the individual's social world. Change has costs, and tradition comes to be valued in itself. As a result, local cultures are sticky to the touch. (2012: 51)

Nonetheless, attention is focused on incremental changes in these practices. To this end, he proposes a process by which some chance event in the life of a group (such as some incident which leads to someone acquiring a nickname) may be incorporated as an ongoing meaningful feature of the idioculture:

Five filtering elements help explain the selection, stability, and salience of items in a group's idioculture. The item must be perceived as known (K), usable (U), functional (F), appropriate (A) in the light of the group's status system, and triggered (T) by experience. (2012: 42)

Somewhat analogously to the accumulation of variations in Darwinian evolution, Fine sees idiocultures as subject to incremental minor variation by a kind of natural selection process applied to actions, incorporated and subsequently diffused to the larger society. This idea arose from Fine's project with the Little League teams, but it is hardly believable that this process is sufficient to explain the *origin* of the idea of LLB, its collaborative launching or its institutionalisation. The same is true of all his projects.

He observes that:

... the ostensible purpose [of groups] is to achieve instrumental goals. Over time the expressive satisfactions of group life may support task goals, but they also may challenge those goals, straining the group's capacity to continue. (2012: 2)

It is notable that many of Fine's subjects are entertainment and leisure activities. In fact, the leisure group is his *archetypal* group, from which he draws the insights he brings to observations of work groups and social activist groups. It is customary in analytical science to choose as an archetype the simplest particular, without regard as to whether all the essential phenomena of the universal can already be found in the archetypal particular. This is what Robert Brandom (2000: 12-15) calls the 'bottom up' rather than 'top down' approach – what Vygotsky (Kravtsov 2012) was referring to when he ironically described his own psychology as 'height psychology' as opposed to 'depth psychology'.

So in that context it is believable that: 'fun is the basis on which commitment rests' (2012: 114). Even in those cases where the group unquestionably exists for 'instrumental' purposes (the restaurant kitchen and the weather forecasters, where group members earn a living by providing a service) Fine focuses exclusively on group participation as an end in itself. In this sense it is hard to accept the claim that 'A group

serves as a microcosm of larger systems' (2012: 38). There is some truth in the idea that commitment to a voluntary group generally implies some internal reward from participation, but it would be facile, for example, to explain the women's liberation movement or the Civil Rights movement and the changes wrought by these movements on the basis of people having fun. Fine does not claim that the women's liberation movement is explained by people having fun, but he does suggest that the small groups which served as subjects for his research constitute true microcosms of larger systems.

Product and Process

It is interesting to note that Fine places a lot of store in his conviction that *stability* is a leading motive for individuals and ascribes motives such as 'creating an engaged civil society' (2012: 141) to individuals. It think it questionable to ascribe such motives to, for example, groups dedicated to getting a candidate elected to office or changing a law, or groups utterly indifferent to political and social issues. What is missing is any sense of the *immanent motive* of a small group. That is, the object which really underlies the motivation of individuals and is realised as the final product of a group's activity.

Fine mistakes the *product* of the social process for the *process* itself. Consequently, he sees only the surface phenomena. While his focus on the workings of small groups has the potential to generate a whole social theory, his conception of the small group is deficient if it is intended to inform our understanding of social change and the dynamics of larger social formations.

Fine's blindness to the immanent motives of small groups is put in relief when he ascribes social stability or civic engagement as motivations. The ascription of these outcomes as motives for groups looks much more like an expression of his own prejudices than the result of any scientific investigation.

An accidental feature of his choice of words in this book is significant in this connection. In the Introduction where he gives an overview of the 11 experiences on which the book is based he refers to them as *projects*, using the word 'project' 20 times, 'study' 2 times, 'foray' once, 'enterprise' once and 'collaboration' twice. Then, in his acknowledgement says: 'Each of these mentors, friends, and colleagues belong to small groups that have provided me with intellectual and social sustenance' (2012: 18). But this pointed comment is belied by what he calls these 'small groups' when he is talking about them *as a participant*: then they are 'projects' not 'groups'. The projects were not for 'fun' (2012: 114) or 'expressive satisfaction' (2012: 2), they were oriented to an objective, even though, as research projects, the outcome was not known in advance. But their motivation flowed from a concept of sociology whose

establishment evidently constitutes Fine's life-work and professional identity. So when we turn from the objects Fine studies to those which really shaped his identity we find projects not groups.

'Group' is a *reified* concept of collaboration in more than one way. It is a concept of collaboration which objectifies the human subjects under study, and groups are also *collaborative projects which have reified themselves as institutions*. Fine's work passably well describes the incremental change affecting institutions, so long as they are not 'subject to new circumstances, internal reassessments, or external shocks' (2012: 51).

Projects, Immanence and Transcendence

So what is posed in this review is a 'correction' to Fine's approach which preserves the power of Fine's microsociology while freeing it from the abstract-empirical, objectivist conception of its subject matter. This entails a concept of people collaborating in pursuit of some objective in a way which is sufficiently general to encompass both one of Fine's own projects and one of the institutionalised groups he studies. I will use the word 'project' to indicate this concept of a motivated group. A project is launched with the explicit aim of resolving some problem, develops into a social movement, during which time its object undergoes development and the movement becomes entangled in the institutions of the larger society, and eventually itself becomes institutionalised, and a word enters the language representing a new concept. The notion of 'project' is intended to encompass this whole life-process.

The 'motive' should not be taken in the sense to which Fine refers when he says: 'the ostensible purpose [of groups] is to achieve instrumental goals' (2012: 1). That is, the motive we require is not something which is conceived of prior to and external to participation in the project, but is immanent in the activity of the group itself. Like any concept, such a concept of motive subsumes a variety of individual realisations and is subject to realisation through its own inner development. In this sense we say that a project is a group with an *immanent* motive.

Secondly, the motive is *transcendent* in the sense that it is never subject to definitive empirical determination. Although Fine's conviction that people participate in groups with the motive of achieving the various goals known only to sociologists is far-fetched and is merely imputed from observing the outcomes of group activity. It is equally wrong to suppose that the motive is determined by the opinion of any of the participants, as to suppose that the immanent motive acts 'behind the backs' of the participants (Hegel 1821 §344). It is a learning process.

In this connection there is an aspect of Fine's work which deserves praise. Although locating his own work in the 'interaction order', or more precisely what he calls the

‘negotiated order’, he makes a pointed critique of other currents of social philosophy which I will call ‘interactionism’:

The model of group culture that I have put forth challenges those dramaturgical and social-constructionist traditions in sociology that have downplayed the importance of history and collective understandings in favour of the idea that order is routinely constructed anew. (2012: 159)

A focus on local context extends the negotiated order approach ... which recognises that negotiations never occur anew but are based on sedimented understandings. This approach challenges constructionist, interactionist, phenomenological, and dramaturgical models that treat meanings as continually being formed and re-formed given the needs of the moment. (2012: 160)

‘Sedimented understandings’ I take to mean forms of action which are objectified in words, signage and other symbols, tools, buildings, land, and all kinds of artefact, and normative forms of practice. As Fine rightly insists, all new creations arise only through the affordances provided by these sedimented activities and more than this, are *stimulated* by contradictions, constraints and problems arising within these sedimented, or institutionalised forms of activity. Nonetheless, despite numerous references to ‘shared history’, history does not figure in Fine’s method, and all the sedimented practices, symbols and artefacts produced by history are taken for granted.

How do we observe the immanent motives of a project? Chiefly by following their development over time. It seems inescapable that *reconstructive* techniques based on historical records will always be an indispensable part of sociological research. The process of historical development of a project is one of continuous critical realisation of its self-concept. Fine studies only the *final product* of this process of historical development; the small groups he studies are the institutionalised products of projects, even though subject to ongoing, incremental change. I prefer to refer to such the institutionalised products of projects as projects *at a stage in their development* where their beliefs, symbols and practices have become routinized and integrated into the wider social formation – institutionalised.

Enquiry into the origins of a practice gives us an initial insight into the defining motivation of a project. For example, Carl Stotz’s aim to teach fair play and team work to young boys and girls, which took form within a specific culture of nuclear family life, philanthropy, Protestant volunteerism and emergent gender equality. This was an adult project realising adult aims. But the pursuit of this aim has become routinized and merged with the practices of an entire social formation. Its immanent motive has been realised in the form of a range of internal and external rewards which obscure the underlying *raison d’etre* which is accessible only to rational and historical analysis. But when the institution is subject to blockages or shocks or as a result of social change is subject to internal reassessment, then this underlying motive, the solution of

a problem which may or may not still exist, resurfaces, and we could say that a project may 'reawaken'. When the underlying problem to which a project responded or the basis on which it was to be solved, no longer exists, the project may die.

Only an historical analysis which, as Fine has shown us, pays attention to the development of the microsociology of a project, can follow how the individual actions realise the immanent motive of a project and thereby disclose the potential for a project to be subject to transformation as a result of internal contradiction or interaction with other projects.

The great advantage of a revision of Fine's approach to include a transcendent immanent motive, transforming his 'small groups' into 'projects', is that *no macrosociology is required to complement it*, and nor do we need metaphors or analogies. A microsociology can effectively unlock the dynamics of macro-social phenomena only if the unit of analysis is well-chosen. If we take not a small group, but a project, as the meso-level unit of analysis, then we have a true sociological cell-form (Marx 1867: 8). The fabric of a social formation can be effectively conceived as woven from projects without recourse to some other unit, but cannot be effectively conceived of as a mosaic of small groups.

Fine says in conclusion:

My call is for sociologists not to study only the group but rather to recognise and highlight how groups build on each other and are linked in generating and responding to larger social structures through a shared history. ... The social structure is not one big thing but many little things that together become a big thing. Groups determine the actions of institutions, and institutions shape group life. (2012: 177)

By 'institutions', I presume Fine means large-scale institutionalised forms of practice, rather than the small scale forms of institutionalised practice which he has studied. He grants that the same concepts cannot be used to understand the behaviour of both institutions and small groups. So the study of small groups *cannot* be extended to understand institutions: some other theory is necessary. But small groups and institutions are part of the *life-cycle* of projects: all the institutions of present-day society are the products of social movements: social movements and institutions are stages in the life-cycle of projects, and can be studied by the combined efforts of microsociology and historical research provided we pay attention to the process by means of which groups come into being and are transformed, rather than accepting them as given objects.

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